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SUBJECT: LIBERIA: CHANGES IN THE SENATE: ONE PARTY CHANGE AND ONE DEATH

REF: MONROVIA 817

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Disputed Acting Senate President Pro Tempore Lahai Lasannah has resigned from the National Democratic Party of Liberia (NDPL) and joined the Liberty Party of Charles Brumskine. Suspended Pro Tempore Isaac Nyenabo is also a member of the NDPL. The case of who is the legitimate leader of the Senate is now before the Supreme Court, while both sides are trying to drag the U.S. Embassy and UNMIL into the dispute. Meanwhile, Senator Isaac N. Johnson, a supporter of Senate President Pro Tempore Isaac Nyenabo in the ongoing leadership squabble at the Senate, died November 12 from complications of a surgery. A by-election will likely result in an additional seat for President Sirleaf's Unity Party. END SUMMARY.

Senator Lasannah Joins Liberty Party

¶2. (SBU) During a press conference at Liberty Party headquarters on November 11, and flanked by 2005 Liberty Party Presidential candidate Charles Brumskine, Lahai Lasannah explained that the reason for his change of party was because the leadership of National Democratic Party of Liberia (NDPL) has decided to take sides in the current leadership squabble at the Senate. The Chairman and other executives of NDPL recently filed a petition at the Supreme Court calling for a reversal of the suspension of Senate Pro Tempore Isaac Nyenabo. An associate justice ordered Nyenabo reinstated, an order which the Senate leadership ignored (reftel). The full court is now hearing the case.

¶3. (SBU) Lasannah was a founding youth member of the NDPL, and a member since the late 1980s. Lasannah mentioned during his press conference that the NDPL has become a "tribal" party. The NDPL was founded by President Samuel Doe in 1984, ahead of the questionable October 1985 Presidential elections, and remains dominated by members of the Krahn ethnic group. Nyenabo, who represents Grand Gedeh County, is Krahn while Lasannah, who represents Bomi County, is a member of the Gola ethnic group.

¶4. (SBU) Liberty Party Chairman Israel Akinsanya told PolAsst that Senator Lasannah's decision to join the Party was an indication that "people were looking the party's way" and that "the party was growing." Akinsanya said that his party's position has remained unchanged; i.e., that the decision of the majority of the Senate to suspend Nyenabo as Senate President Pro Tempore was legal and that the party recognizes Lasannah as acting President Pro Tempore. The party will shortly issue a statement to reiterate this view.

¶5. (SBU) Both sides have been trying in the press to draw both the Embassy and UNMIL into the dispute. Senator Nyenabo used an Embassy invitation to the Peace Corps swearing-in ceremony October 27 to declare that the Embassy recognized him as the legitimate Senate leader. In the end, he opted not to attend the ceremony to avoid creating unwelcome publicity that would have taken away from the event, but Nyenabo did attend the Embassy's Election Night reception November 4. Lassanah, who was also invited, did not attend. However, the Ambassador met with Lassanah and several other Senators on November 3. The dispute with Nyenabo was not discussed. SRSG

Loej declined to meet with them, which has been reported in the press.

Senator Isaac Johnson Dies

¶6. (U) River Gee County Junior Senator, Isaac N. Johnson, died at the J.F.K. Medical Center in Monrovia during the early hours of Wednesday, November 12, several days after undergoing a hernia operation at a local clinic. He was a supporter of Senate President Pro Tempore Isaac Nyenabo in the ongoing leadership squabble at the Senate. He condemned the procedure used to suspend Nyenabo as "arbitrary" and "unlawful."

¶7. (U) Born in 1957, Senator Isaac Johnson was a member of the Liberia Action Party (LAP) which joined the Coalition for the Transformation of Liberia (COTOL) in 2005. The death of Senator Isaac Johnson brings to six the number of lawmakers (four representatives and two senators) who have died in office since January 2006. All the others died of natural causes. Johnson served as Minister of State without Portfolio when Amos Sawyer was Interim President of Liberia from 1990 to 1994.

Geographically Challenging By-Election

¶8. (SBU) A by-election is expected to be held to replace the late Senator Isaac Johnson between January and February 2009. The pending by-election will bring to seven the number of by-elections held since the 2005 General and Presidential Elections. (Note: the

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first by-election was the result of election fraud during the 2005 election. End note.) The remoteness of River Gee County and the lack of roads make the pending by-election a logistical challenge. President Sirleaf's Unity Party is expected to win the seat because the county Superintendent, Khaku Sampson, a Unity Party stalwart, has been consolidating the party in the county since his inauguration as Superintendent in 2006.

¶9. (SBU) Comment: The death of Senator Isaac Johnson will affect Nyenabo's ability to maintain his beleaguered position as President Pro Tempore of the Liberian Senate, as Johnson was his most vocal supporter on the Senate floor. The Unity Party has demonstrated its organizational abilities in recent by-elections, and is slowly building a potent political machine.

THOMAS-GREENFIELD